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SUBJECT: Senegal: Imams Call for Civil Disobedience

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On December 6, a group of imams (Muslim religious leaders) led a protest in the streets of the Guediawaye suburb of Dakar, to demand a reduction in the cost of electricity. They are threatening to refuse to pay their bills and to spread the protest by calling for the support of other imams across the country. The imams also called on their followers to avoid using electricity.
End Summary

High Prices and Bad Service

¶2. (SBU) The Senegalese National Electricity Company (Senelec) is a parastatal, which like the government itself, is in bad financial shape. Its obsolete plants and cash flow problems are the cause of endemic power cuts. As part of the government's IMF-monitored program to return to fiscal balance, in July the government ended massive, long-standing subsidies to the company. This resulted in electricity price increases of 17 percent on average, with large consumers paying up to 40 percent more. This move led to the doubling of the bills of many households. Most Senegalese use incandescent bulbs rather than energy efficient ones and old and inefficient discarded appliances (freezers and refrigerators), collected in Europe and sold on the local market.

New Religious Leadership

¶3. (SBU) A protest led by imams is unprecedented in Senegal, where they are viewed as social regulators who prevent or settle conflicts rather than initiate them. The National Assembly Deputy who represents the Guediawaye district, Khalidou Niasse, told Embassy that these are new types of imams, "The two imams who led the protest, Imam Sarr and Imam Diop are, respectively, a retired police officer and a retired financial officer who used to work for the government. They are not the traditional Sufi Imam from local Koranic schools who do not grasp the sophistication of modern society." According to reports, the imams went to meet government leaders with a computer expert who had prepared simulations that showed huge discrepancies between the increases announced and the bills distributed. The rise of this new kind leadership is the result of a deep transformation of the suburbs of Dakar which are no longer just huge slums for the urban poor. Middle class civil servants have moved to these suburbs, attracted by new and more affordable housing development projects. This has changed the sociology of these suburbs with new citizens who are more demanding and likely to exert pressure on government authorities.

Mitigated response

¶4. (SBU) President Abdoulaye Wade responded promptly by firing the CEO of Senelec. The government accuses the ousted CEO of failing to properly communicate the price increases. The Prime Minister's

Office, following a meeting with protesters, issued a press release indicating that out of the 721,350 subscribers of Senelec, 45 percent saw their bills decrease by three to ten percent to include the poorest Senegalese (without noting that the poorest of Senegal's population do not have access to electricity, and less than one-third of Senegal's families have accounts with the utility.) The Prime Minister's statement claims that 54 percent of customers saw their bills increase between two and 30 percent. The GOS further indicated that in 2009 they will seek to spread the use of low energy bulbs through cooperation with Iran. They also promised reparations to people who lost appliances because of frequent power surges.

Imams maintain a radical line

¶ 15. (SBU) The imams also met with Energy Minister Samuel Sarr. They rejected the government's measures as stalling tactics saying that they still wanted the cancellation of the official 17 percent increase and the implementation of a scaled pricing system that makes the largest consumers pay higher prices for each kilowatt they use. The imams also argued, given that the price of electricity was linked directly to the high price of oil, now that the cost of a barrel is significantly lower than a few months ago, the cost of electricity should also decrease. The meeting with the Energy Minister did not bring a resolution and the situation remains deadlocked.

Government Threatening to Take a Hard Line

¶ 16. (SBU) An advisor to the President told Embassy that the GOS will suspend the electricity supply of those imams who refuse to pay their bills. He added that these imams "received financial help from the President as well as support for their mosques from the

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President's son Karim." He indicated that 90 percent of them belong to the Tidjane Muslim brotherhood and the GOS will seek mediation from the highest authorities of this brotherhood to calm tensions. (Note: President Wade is a member of the Mourides brotherhood. End note.) In the interim, the leader of the hard-line Islamic group Ibadu Rahmene has expressed support for his protesting colleagues and is calling for more widespread protests.

Imams Filling Political Leadership Vacuum

¶ 16. (SBU) Comment: This confrontation with the government by imams is a result of the leadership vacuum left by weak trade unions, ineffective civil society participation in economic policy, and an enfeebled political opposition. These imams are becoming representatives for poor and working class Senegalese who have lost faith in political and civil society leaders. By engaging in and encouraging this civil disobedience, the imams are becoming a conduit of the anger of Dakar's increasingly frustrated young and unemployed urban masses. In the short term tensions look likely to increase. End comment.

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